

Who Has Health Literacy Problems?

Health literacy problems affect people from all backgrounds, especially those with chronic health problems.

Older people, non-whites, immigrants, and those with low incomes are disproportionately more likely to have trouble reading and understanding health-related information.

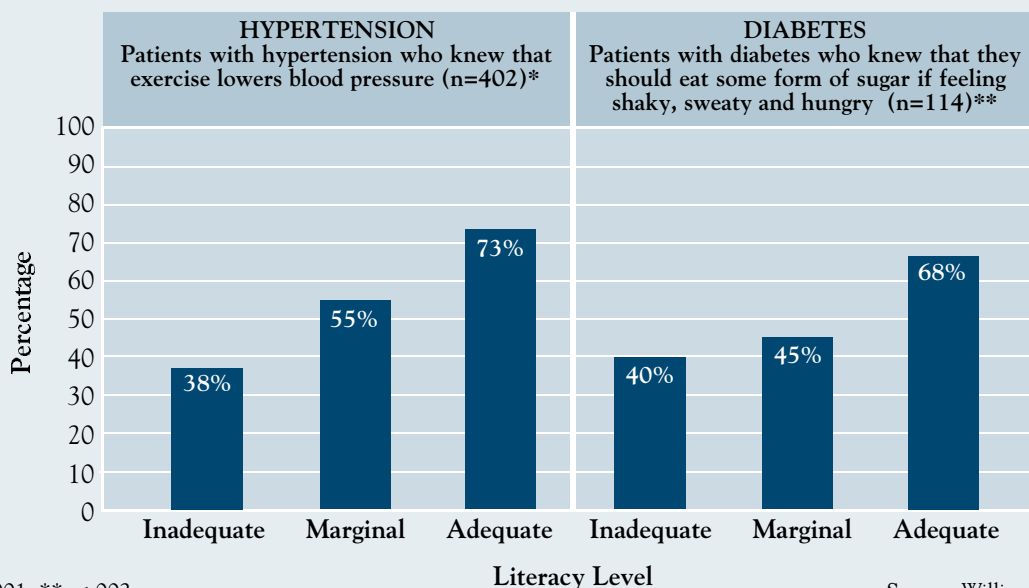
- According to the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS):¹
 - 66% of U.S. adults age 60 and over have inadequate or marginal literacy skills.
 - 50% of welfare recipients read below fifth-grade level.
 - 50% of Hispanic Americans and 40% of African Americans have reading problems.
- Inadequate literacy was an independent risk factor for hospital admission among 3,260 elderly managed care enrollees.²
- Health literacy problems were independently associated with worse glycemic control among 408 English- and Spanish-speaking patients with diabetes.³

Those with poor health literacy are more likely to have a chronic disease and less likely to get the health care they need.

- According to the NALS,¹ 75% of Americans who reported having a long-term illness (six months or more) had limited literacy. This may mean they know less about their conditions or how to handle symptoms.
- Emergency room patients with inadequate literacy are twice as likely to be hospitalized as those with adequate literacy — even after adjusting for self-reported health, health insurance, and socioeconomic characteristics (32% vs. 15% in a study of 979 patients).⁴

continued on back

Patient Knowledge about their Chronic Disease by Level of Functional Health Literacy⁵

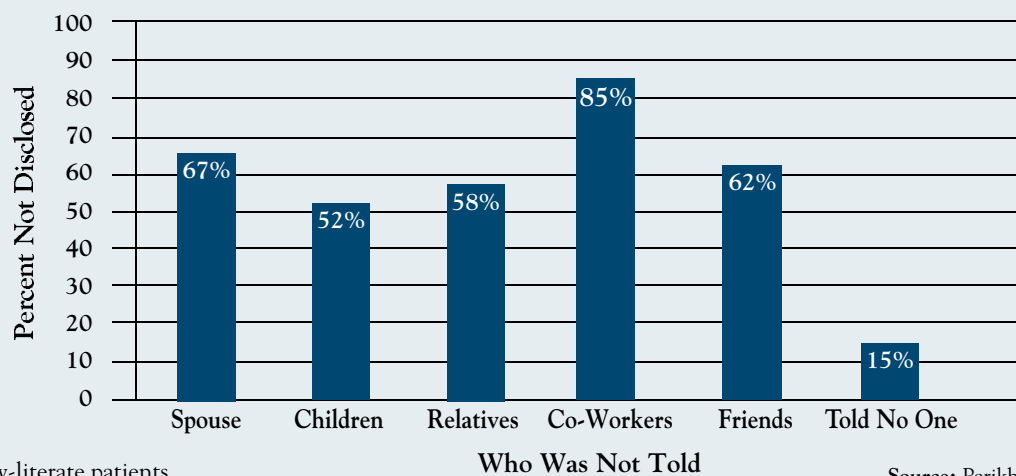


But “You can’t tell by looking.”

Even practitioners who have worked with low-literacy patients for years are often surprised at the poor reading skills of some of their most poised and articulate patients.⁶

- Two-thirds of 58 patients who admitted having reading difficulties had never told their spouse. Nine of them had told no one.⁷
- Physicians at a women’s health clinic could identify only 20% of their patients who were at the lowest literacy level (<third grade).⁸

Lack of Disclosure of Reading Difficulty by Patients* Who Admit Low Literacy⁷



*58 low-literate patients

Source: Parikh, et al., 1996.

References

1. Kirsch J, et al. *Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Results of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS)*. Department of Education, 1993.
2. Baker DW. “Functional Health Literacy and the Risk of Hospital Admission among Medicare Managed Care Enrollees.” *American Journal of Public Health*, 2002; 92.
3. Schillinger D, et al. “Association of Health Literacy with Diabetes Outcomes.” *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 2002; 288.
4. Baker DW, et al. “Health Literacy and the Risk of Hospital Admission.” *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 1998; 13.
5. Williams MV, et al. “Relationship of Functional Health Literacy to Patients’ Knowledge of their Chronic Disease: A Study of Patients with Hypertension and Diabetes.” *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 1998; 158.
6. Parker R, Williams MV, and Davis T. *Low Health Literacy — You Can’t Tell by Looking*. American Medical Association Foundation, 1999.
7. Parikh NS, et al. “Shame and Health Literacy: The Unspoken Connection.” *Patient Education and Counseling*, 1996; 27.
8. Lindau ST, et al. “The Association of Health Literacy with Cervical Cancer Prevention Knowledge and Health Behaviors in a Multiethnic Cohort of Women.” *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 2002; 186.

The production of this Fact Sheet was made possible through funding from The Commonwealth Fund and Pfizer Inc.